OPTING FOR STATELESSNESS*

THE ART OF NOT BEING GOVERNED is vintage James Scott: sweeping in scope, provocative in argument and lucid in style. It is an ambitious work that spans a *longue durée* of two millennia of south-east Asian history. More precisely, it focuses on Zomia (a Tibeto-Burman neologism meaning ''region of remote people''), the highland massif that stretches from north-east India, through Bangladesh, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand to the central highlands of Vietnam. Its main thesis is that over the centuries these highlands have been a vast ''region of refuge'' inhabited by communities, which have chosen not only to flee the instability and violence of lowland states but also to deliberately opt for statelessness. This study of the making not of states but of statelessness counters the conventional teleological account of the formation of nation-states through the gradual incorporation of isolated, backward populations on their peripheries. Instead it highlights the ''state-repellent'' strategies of upland marginal groups, which developed ingenious, semi-autonomous, alternative stateless systems. Like Eric Wolf's monumental *Europe and People without History* (1982), with its focus on those on periphery of the world system, Scott's study aims to draw into regional history and give agency to those on the margins of the nation-state. But while Wolf highlighted the patterns of global interconnections between those at the periphery and the centres, Scott chooses to focus instead on the disconnection of subaltern communities, who chose to opt out of state control.

This path-breaking book offers a powerful counter-narrative to that of the development of (modern) states as part of civilisational progress. It argues that characteristic features of stateless hill societies, which have often been examined in isolation from one another, can be read as ''state effects'' if taken together. Geographic dispersion, political decentralisation, shifting cultivation, economic self-sufficiency, segmentary kinship organisation and fuzzy ethnic boundaries can be understood as deliberate and defensive responses to evade extraction and avoid oppression by valley kingdoms. This bold thesis is an

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important corrective to the unilineal view of isolated, backward hill communities that are yet to be brought within the fold of the nation-state. It shows instead that these societies, which have been in continuous contact with state projects, are integral to the history of state-formation in the region. The hill communities' plural histories, their lineage structures and mode of swidden cultivation, their religious heterodoxy and non-hierarchical political organisation, are all thus interpreted as reactions to state formation in the valleys. For Scott these are political choices designed to keep at bay the threat of being governed. Hunting, foraging, slash-and-burn cultivation in the hills were not primitive techniques in the absence of knowledge of wet rice cultivation but were deliberate choices that required low labour input and allowed little surplus accumulation, which was also difficult to appropriate.

The thesis is based on a wealth of secondary historical sources and ethnographic material including the works of Leach, Lehman, Lattimore but also Clastres. Most of the historical documentation relied on for the region, however, is confined to the period between 1850 and 1950. Yet Scott seems to claim near universal applicability for the model derived from the history of South-East Asian hill communities to all fringe regions of ''internal colonialism''. For the Zomia model is generalised to ancient Rome, Roma in Europe, Berbers in the Atlas Mountains, Cossacks in the Russian steppes, or Maroon communities and fugitive slaves the world over, whose examples are marshalled to make a case for the anarchist politics of all unruly frontiers.

More specifically, for South-East Asia the book demonstrates how the very landscape of Zomia precluded the amassment of wealth by limiting both the available surplus of grain and manpower. But the difficult terrain also ''prevented civilisations from climbing hills'', as Scott pithily puts it, in pursuit of labour and taxes. One of the book's compelling claims is about the ''friction of terrain'', which protected against state domination and aided autonomy. The idea compels us to revise our cartographic representations and rethink the significance of lines on political maps, which render invisible the difficulties for army and administration to access rugged mountainous areas. Population dynamics and ecological factors are thus convincingly shown to be pivotal for an understanding of social change in an area characterised by an abundance of land and a shortage of labour. Yet the argument of the book is not free from traces of both demographic and geographical determinism. For it turns migration to the uplands, one factor in the historical dynamics of the region, into its chief defining feature in the past 2000 years.

Whereas Scott's earlier studies of peasant resistance focussed on voice, or the everyday practices of subversion of authority in the absence of conditions that would allow for open opposition, this book is about exit. Like several of his now classic works – *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in Southeast Asia* (1976), *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The Hidden Transcript of Subordinate Groups* (1990) –, which are variations on the theme of resistance to power, the present volume too explores the agency of subaltern groups in unexpected places and practices. But it shifts the earlier focus on sedentary peasants challenging dominance *within* agrarian systems to mobile hill people, who have chosen to fully turn their backs on coercive state-making projects. These hill communities thus embody a more fundamental mode of opposition to the systems of slave-raiding, taxation, deportation, conscription and forced labour by moving out of imperial cores altogether. The present volume also sets a counter point to his *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998). If exercise of centralising state power is predicated on the use of techniques to render the social and economic life of subjects ''legible'', for Scott, shifting cultivation among hill peoples, like their fluid and flexible ethnic identifications, and even the absence of writing, are all choices designed to make their lives ''illegible'' to valley kingdoms and colonial state administration.

Attractive as the stringency and stunning simplicity of this explanation for a variety of characteristics of hill societies across the region and the ages may be, its mono-causality is problematic on several counts. For one, it reinforces the neat binaries of settled agriculture *vs.* slash-and-burn cultivation, valley kingdoms vs. hill peoples, state *vs.* anti-/non-state societies, while merely reversing their valorisation. Zones and communities that have straddled or interconnected the two are not taken into account. For another, it greatly overemphasises the significance of the state in determining every aspect of the social, economic, cultural and political lives of those in stateless societies, who were outside its ambit. Consequently the reach, influence and effectiveness of the state in south and South-East Asia are greatly overestimated. Unlike modern European states, pre-colonial states in most of the non-Western world had neither the capacity nor the political will to entirely colonise the life-worlds of their subjects. In fact, even in the plains of the region, the state was probably rather marginal to the lives of most people for much of their pre-modern histories.

However, Scott's model paradoxically also underestimates the significance of the internal dynamics of hill communities. Interpreted solely through the optic of opposition to the valley state, all features of hill communities are reduced to functional dependence on the imperial valley state, which alone retains autonomous agency. It would be almost impossible to provide a counterfactual explanation about the amount of weight that should be assigned to the state in the making of hill societies. Yet rich ethnographic accounts of highland Papua New Guinea, for instance, allow a thought experiment that mounts a serious challenge to Scott's central thesis. Papua New Guinea's highland groups exhibit the very same features that mark South-East Asian uplands: an extraordinary linguistic and cultural diversity, the absence of writing, a shifting cultivation, cephalous political systems and constant low-intensity warfare. Yet the valley state, with reference to whose predatory politics Scott explains all these features in South-East Asia, was conspicuous by its absence. Moreover, a Manichean picture contrasting the violence of the predatory, centralising valley state with the egalitarian equilibrium of small, self-governing hill republics is misleading for both regions. For the celebration of statelessness not only neglects the existence of complex systems of ranking and honour but also obscures the record of constant feuding *within* villages and lineages as well as of endemic warfare, violence and even sometimes headhunting *between* hill communities in both South-East Asia and in Papua New Guinea.

By casting the state as the quintessential *Other* of hill societies, Scott's thesis neither takes account of the variety of classical, early modern, imperial and colonial states nor of the chequered history of state-making in societies as different as China, Thailand, Laos, Burma, Vietnam or north-east India. But it also overlooks the varied meanings and significance of state institutions and practices for local populations in different contexts. The model cannot explain the present day demands for self-determined statehood among hill peoples and the desire for a just state, which would deliver the fruits of economic development. Hill peoples today are protesting nationally and internationally in many regions of the world against their unequal and unjust treatment within the nation-state. Even if this were a relatively recent trend beyond the scope of the book's historical thesis, little in its account would explain the seemingly radical changes in the hills, where intense aversion and avoidance of the state seems to have been recently replaced by a strong desire and vociferous demand for a functioning state. And this despite the often deep distrust among hill populations of the designs and practices of real existing states.

While valleys homogenized and centralised, Scott argues, the hills produced egalitarianism, decentralisation, economic minimalism and diversity. He is at pains to stress the continuous, creative adaptability of upland small-scale, subsistence societies. In an attempt to restore historical agency to them, all migration to the uplands is interpreted as a deliberate choice in the defence of freedom from state control. But such a reading tends to obscure the histories of forced displacement, the durability of duress, expropriation and dispossession that deprived communities of their lands and of access to the commons, thus driving them into the hills. Whether and to what extent the push towards more difficult and unproductive terrain at higher elevations was the result of, or in reaction to, official state policies and practices, or was due to conflicts with, and pressure from, powerful groups in the plains is a moot question. Given its singular preoccupation with the state as the nemesis of hill societies, Scott's model fails to distinguish between these two possibilities, one of which has little to do with state projects.

The radical constructionist perspective adopted in the book yields some unexpected and valuable insights into the fluidity and malleability of ethnic labels and identifications in the region. In the place of stable, unchanging, bounded hill ''tribes'', it presents a nuanced picture of footloose families on the move, able to change languages, ethnicity, histories and genealogies according to the circumstances. These populations in a flux were constantly losing members in slave raids or epidemics but also gaining them by way of runaways incorporated through kinship and marriage mechanisms. For Scott these ''jelly-fish'' societies were constituted by the logic, ''divide that ye be not ruled''. But multiple, porous and contextually shifting identities may have been a concomitant of social fragmentation in the hills. Or fuzzy, overlapping identifications may be due to the absence of modern colonial administrative technologies of enumeration, as Sudipto Kaviraj has compelling shown for the plurality of pre-modern caste and religious identities in the plains of India, where the pre-colonial state neither policed the boundaries of social units nor intervened in everyday social life.

The least plausible argument in the book concerns the deliberate eschewing of literacy by hill tribes in order to escape state control. Myths about the loss of script or literacy due to accident or deceit, which abound among many a subaltern group in the hills but also in the plains, can hardly be read as reflecting historical processes. The claim that many of these communities are not pre-literate but had a script, which they have abandoned in order to be able to oscillate

between orality and writing depending on the circumstances, remains unsubstantiated. Neither are we given evidence of the loss of literacy as a matter of deliberate choice or as a result of historical processes, which eroded the institutional basis for the reproduction of writing skills. Scott's functionalist argument emphasises the advantages of the absence of a written historical record in aiding selective remembering, providing greater flexibility to remake collective identities and to forge changing political alliances. It does not consider that absence of literacy may be equally linked with, for instance, the lack of commercial, urban or wealthy, powerful religious centres of learning and of a priestly caste/class. Not only does Scott's account reduce writing to its political functions alone, but it also fails to consider the world of difference between the recognition of the advantages of oral tradition and the giving up of script as a conscious collective choice.

The often overdrawn argument of the book may not entirely convince the sceptic. But this panoramic and iconoclastic study sets a new paradigm for the analysis of hill-valley interactions and of state-making in South-East Asia and elsewhere. Even scholars who disagree with many aspects of Scott's thesis will have to debate these issues in terms set by this bold and brilliant book on ''barbarians by choice''.

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